



SECRETS YOU NEED TO KNOW

Weed Pulling or Wheat Planting

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"'An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" Matthew 13:24-30

I love Jesus' stories. Not only are they full of colorful images that we can all relate to, but they address some of the most pressing questions of our everyday lives. Take this story for example. If it were only about weeds and wheat, it would have little relevance to the life of an urbanite.

Sure, we struggle with weeds. But they're nothing that a little shot of *Roundup* can't take care of. On the other hand, few of us who live in the city think much about wheat. And even fewer about the problem of weeds and wheat growing together.

What we *do* think about, however, is what this story is getting at – questions like:

- Why is there such evil in the world?
- How can a good God allow that to continue?
- Why doesn't God just step in and make everything right?
- And since he obviously doesn't, how are *we* supposed to deal with evil?
- Is it our job, or the job of the church, to "reform" society?
- Is it our job to root out evil?

Simply put, *how do we deal with evil people?*

Jesus knew his disciples were wrestling with those questions. Just before giving this series of parables, he described the generation living at that time as being "wicked and adulterous" (Matthew 13:39). And Jesus was right – not only about his generation but about every generation before and since that time.

I can't help but believe that as Jesus' disciples heard that colorful description of their generation, they shook their heads in agreement. Maybe they said, "Jesus, your right Things have gotten pretty bad." And they were right! Just years before, Herod the Great committed genocide, wiping out all the male children of Bethlehem who were two years old or younger. And then to top it off, he executed his own son. And just a few months before Jesus told this very parable, Herod Antipas left his wife and decided to shack up with his own niece while on a business trip to Rome. When John the Baptist spoke up about it, it cost him his head.

Given the intense opposition to Jesus as recorded in Matthew 12, the disciples may well have felt that they needed to do something to root out the evil that opposed the establishment of Christ's kingdom. On another occasion, when the Samaritans didn't welcome Jesus, two of the disciples asked, "Lord, don't you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?" (Luke 9:51-56). The text simply says that Jesus turned and rebuked them.

So, *how do we deal with evil people?* In this new expression of the kingdom of heaven since the time of Christ, what is our calling as believers as we relate to evil all around us? In this story, Jesus answers those questions, and he does so in three movements.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A FIELD OF WEEDS AND WHEAT

First, he tells us something about the nature of the "kingdom of heaven." He tells us that it is like a field of both weeds and wheat.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' "An enemy did this,' he replied. Matthew 13:27-28a

36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. Matthew 13:36-39a

If we're going to get what Jesus is saying in these stories, we've got to understand what the "kingdom of heaven" is all about. After all, the expression is used six times in this chapter, introducing six of the eight parables.

For there to be a kingdom, three things must be present. There must be a *ruler*. There must be the *rule* or *reign* of that ruler. And there must be a *realm* over which the ruler rules. In the disciples minds, so far, so good – Jesus, you are the ruler, Israel is the realm, and you (not the Romans!) are going to rule over that realm. So let's get on with it! Expel the evil, establish the good and everything will be all right!

But Jesus is saying, "Not so fast, guys." In light of Israel's rejection (à la chapter 12), a new "secret" form of the kingdom is now in play. And it looks like this; it's like a field with both weeds and wheat.

In this new mystery phase of God's Kingdom, Jesus, the Son of Man, is the one who is sowing the good seed. But in contrast to the Old Testament where God's kingdom was manifested in and through *one* nation, the "field" in which this seed is being sown is the entire world of *many* nations.

The good seed stands for the "sons of the kingdom," i.e. true believers, those who respond in obedience to God's Word and become a part of God's family.ⁱ And the weeds are the sons of the Devil, those who turn away from Christ. While Jesus Christ is the one who sows the good seed resulting in wheat, it is the Devil himself who sows the bad seed resulting in weeds.

Some may feel that Jesus is just too simplistic here, dividing all of humanity into the "sons of the Kingdom" and the "sons of the evil one." Maybe Jesus needs some "diversity training!" Shouldn't he speak in more politically correct terms? Shouldn't he be more tolerant and less categorical? If you're thinking that, I encourage you to hold on. If there is ever a biblical passage that talks about "tolerance," it's this one.

The bottom line, however, is this. There *are* two groups of people – sons of the kingdom or sons of the evil one, those still in the first man, Adam, or those who by simple faith in God's grace are in the second Man, Christ.

Let me ask you: To which humanity do you belong? Are you a son of the kingdom, or are you still a son of the evil one? Are you a weed, or are you wheat? By virtue of our *physical birth*, we are weeds, i.e. sons of the evil one. But thanks to *spiritual rebirth*, we can become wheat, i.e. sons of the kingdom.

AT THE END OF THE AGE THE SON OF MAN WILL WEED HIS FIELD

This transformation from weeds to wheat is so very important because of Jesus' second point. It's this: *At the end of the age Jesus (the Son of Man) will weed his field.*

At that time he will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn. Matthew 13:30b

The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Matthew 13:39b-43

In Palestine, after the good grain was harvested with a sickle, the remaining weeds would be burned off. Wood was scarce in Palestine, so some of these weeds would be cut and bundled together to be used as fuel.ⁱⁱ

That's what took place in Palestine. But at the end of the ages, a much more important separation is going to take place – a separation between the weeds and wheat, between the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one.

Unbelievers will not be allowed to enter the Kingdom which Jesus Christ will someday establish on this earth. And because of that there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” an expression that describes the type of profound regret and sorrow experienced by those who reject Christ in this life.ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast, true believers – the “sons of the kingdom,” will “shine like the sun” since they are identified with the very Son of Righteousness, Christ himself.^{iv}

If you are here today and have never experienced that transformation from weed to wheat, don't wait. Jesus is still in the business of sowing good seed in his field. He will take your weedy heart and transform it this very instant.

But there is also in Jesus' words encouragement for those who are already “sons of the kingdom.” We can be assured that the kingdom of heaven will never fall prey to the powers of darkness. God's will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus is saying: “I'm creating a better world. It's the world for which all creation now groans (Romans 8). It's the world in which little girls are not sexually abused, in which people don't break into your house and kidnap your child, in which self-centered tyrants who oppress the helpless are no longer in authority.”

IN THE MEANTIME WE ARE CALLED TO PLANT WHEAT NOT PULL WEEDS

But for those who are sons of the kingdom, how should this affect how we live today? Until that day of harvest comes, how are we to live in the meantime? How do we respond to evil people and evil things all around us? After all, this is the main point Jesus is getting at. Check out the servants' question in verses 28-30:

The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them [the weeds] up?'
"No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. Matthew 13:28b—30a

When Jesus here talks about weeds, he's not talking about some relatively harmless dandelion or crab grass. The enemy sowed “darnel,” a type of weed that grows exclusively in the Middle East. It is related to wheat, but is actually a poisonous fungus.^v

We might feel that there is a lot of that in our surrounding culture. Politicians who promote the taking of unborn lives or who promote lifestyles that are destructive to the fabric of society. And then there are those who wrong us personally whom we would like to “weed” out of our lives.

We might respond like the disciples, “Lord, don't you want us to call down fire from heaven?” But just like he did his disciples, Jesus rebukes you and me, saying “Let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest.”

But why? Well, Jesus tells us why. The first thing he tells us is that you and I are not able to properly discern between weeds and wheat. So don't try to; only God knows the difference.

The weeds Jesus' talks about are what might be called today “bearded darnel.” It's a weed similar to rye grass. The wheat and the weeds look very similar until the wheat begins to form grains. Only at that point does the difference become obvious.

Here's an example. In his early teens he left his godly mother and rebelled against everything she stood for. He moved in with his girlfriend and got her pregnant. He stayed with her for about 15 years, but then dumped her and got engaged to someone else who could better promote his own career. But during his engagement, he began living with another woman. At this time he joined a cult and became a skeptic, calling into question God's existence.

Weed or wheat? Should he be "rooted out" or left to alone? Well, if you tear him out, you tear out Saint Augustine, who later became one of the greatest theologians and church leaders in the history of Christianity.^{vi}

The wheat and weeds Jesus talks about grew with an intertwined root system. So if you uproot one you uproot the other. When Constantine converted to Christianity, he fixed the symbol of the cross on the shields of his soldiers. Nearly overnight Christians went from being the persecuted to the persecutors.

During the Middle Ages, the church of Europe felt that it was its responsibility to "pull out weeds." This led to the Inquisition which executed thousands of Jews and non-Christians. And then there were the Crusades which sought to "weed out" the Muslim infidels. Even among the Reformers, to whom we owe a recovery of the doctrines of grace, there were those who carried on their hands the blood of innocent civilians. Why? Because they thought it was their responsibility to "weed" God's field in view of establishing a "Christian" society. But all of this misunderstands the lesson of the wheat and the weeds.

What then should we do? Jesus says, "Let the weeds and the wheat grow together." Such a perspective was quite radical for the disciples. After all, the disciples were very concerned about their own nation, Israel. They saw the very leaders of their Jewish people reject Christ outright. And beyond that, Rome was oppressive and cruel.

Believers can have the same concern today. There is a movement afoot that wants us to focus our efforts on "weed pulling." If we could simply change our policies, get rid of those who oppose God's Word, and restore America to its "Christian roots," then all would be well. But Jesus reminds us that we are called to "plant wheat," not "pull weeds."

Practically, how are we to do that? How are we to respond to evil people?

First, *expect to suffer*. Peter reminds us, "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (1 Peter 4:16). The Christians of the 1st Century lived under an oppressive rule. Evil was not just tolerated but promoted by the very ones entrusted with maintaining order and a degree of civility. As long as there are "weeds" in the field, there will be suffering. But the final chapter is not yet written. We live in the "already-but-not-yet" form of God's kingdom. We are *already* "sons of the kingdom," but the fullness of that kingdom has *not yet* come. So expect to suffer.

Second, *pray for God's protection*. This is what Jesus tells us to do. "Lead us not into temptation," he teaches us to pray, "but deliver us from the evil one." It is ultimately Satan who is at work in all that opposes righteousness. And our greatest shield of defense is prayer.

Third, *overcome evil with good*. Focus on “planting wheat,” not “pulling weeds.” We don’t overcome evil by attacking the abortionist or by picketing the strip clubs. We overcome evil by planting the good seed of God’s kingdom. And that “good seed” is the gospel. It is the gospel spoken by our mouths. But it is also the gospel lived out by our hands and feet in society.

Finally, *thank God he’s provided a way for weeds to become wheat*. It takes place through the same “germination” process that we talked about last week. When the “seed” of God’s Word falls on your heart and you respond in faith, your “weedy” heart is transformed. You move from being a “son of the evil one” to being a “son of the King.”

Is this your desire today? It can happen to you. God wants to bring about a great harvest in your life, if you will but say “yes” to Jesus Christ. If that is your desire this morning, would you just pray this prayer with me in your own heart:

Dear God, I recognize my need for inner change, the kind of change that only you can bring. My heart is full of weeds...I am “weed,” separated from you. But I want to become a “son of the Kingdom.” And when you return, I want to shine with you like the sun in your kingdom. So today, I place my faith in you. Change me deep within. I believe you are the Son of God. I believe you died to make this change possible. I ask you, make me your child today. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 12:46-50.

ⁱⁱ Mark L. Bailey, “The Parable of the Tares,” *BibliothecaSacra* 155 (July – September 1998): 272.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30.

^{iv} Daniel 12:3; Malachi 4:2.

^v Mark L. Bailey, “The Parable of the Tares,” *BibliothecaSacra* 155 (July – September 1998): 270.

^{vi} Illustration adapted from message on this passage by Kevin Miller, “How do we handle dangerous people?” www.preachingtoday.com